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*Religion, Secularism,  
and Ethnicity in  
Contemporary  
Nepal*

*edited by*

David N. Gellner

Sondra L. Hausner

Chiara Letizia

रवि शाक्य, इखाछै, यल

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Published in India by  
Oxford University Press  
YMCA Library Building, 1 Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110 001, India

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First Edition published in 2016

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ISBN-13: 978-0-19-946772-3  
ISBN-10: 0-19-946772-2

Typeset in ScalaPro 10/13  
by The Graphics Solution, New Delhi 110 092  
Printed in India by Replika Press Pvt. Ltd

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## BLOOD SACRIFICE IN NEPAL

### TRANSFORMATIONS AND CRITICISM

*Axel Michaels*

HUMANS DO NOT NEED TO eat meat for survival, but probably fewer than 5 to 6 per cent of the human population forego meat on principle.<sup>1</sup> One (traditional) form of killing animals is through sacrifice, but nowadays, wherever animals are sacrificed in public, protests almost inevitably follow. This also holds true for Nepal, where many blood sacrifices can (still) be seen in shrines, temples, and streets. My focus will be on the materiality of the blood itself and the imaginaries and discourses evolving around it in the public sphere. This chapter therefore deals with rituals and responses to them as well as their transformations in a trans-cultural and media-saturated world. Whereas traditional accounts of blood sacrifice in Nepal emphasize the shedding of blood for life, prosperity, protection, or building alliances, more recent debates focus on notions of blood for martyrdom—actually

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks are due to Manik Bajracharya, Christiane Brosius, David Gellner, Niels Gutschow, Sondra Hausner, Chiara Letizia, Astrid Zotter, and Christof Zotter for discussions, hints, and providing valuable material. The chapter is partly based on Michaels (2007).

another form of sacrificing life for (better) life—and the visibility and materiality of blood in the Nepalese public sphere.

In what follows I therefore mainly try to understand blood ritual “in its own right” (Handelman 2004), that is, in its local setting and with its emic explanations. In other words, I try to explain why blood rituals are performed in Nepal, especially in Bhaktapur, but I will not deal with theories of sacrifice in general. I am aware that the sacrifice may be seen as a gift, a transfer of power, or even as a kind of bribery (Tylor) on the basis of the binding *do ut des* or *do ut possis dare* (van der Leeuw), or that it can be interpreted as producing a sacrificial community (Robertson Smith, Durkheim), as the staging of a primal event (Jensen), as an eruption and mastery (Girard, Burkert, Heesterman), as ‘rebounding violence’ (Bloch), or as many other things (see also Lecomte-Tilouine 2013).<sup>2</sup> Even though some aspects of these and other theories are important for my analysis, I try to resist reducing a complex phenomenon to a single idea. I will also avoid extensive discussion of Indological theories of Vedic or Hindu sacrifice in general (see Michaels 2004: 246f.), because these debates more or less concentrate on notions of gift exchange (Lévi 1898; Malamoud 1996: Chapter 9), destruction (Heesterman 1993), abandonment (Biardeau in Biardeau and Malamoud 1976), or substitution for self-sacrifice (Smith and Doniger 1989), but rarely on the very blood-i-ness of sacrifices.

In contradistinction to the significance of blood as substance, metaphor, and symbol in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, astonishingly few Indian or Nepalese indigenous theories on blood sacrifice have been developed. One mostly finds them in Tantric texts and more recently in the press media. Given the high number of animal sacrifices especially in Nepal, it is surprising that so few emic reflections on them are available. The reason for this I see in the fact that much criticism of blood sacrifices does not question the sacrifice itself, that is, the killing of animals, and its religious implications, but focuses rather on its publicly demonstrated materiality—the visibility of blood in the streets.

Despite the long and elaborate sacrificial tradition in Hinduism, the visibility of blood sacrifices has decreased considerably in South

<sup>2</sup> All these theories of sacrifice are discussed in Michaels (2004: 146–52) and Drexel (1993).

Asia. The exceptions are survivals of blood rituals and cults in some regions, in Bengal (Samanta 1994; McDermott 1996; Kinsley 1986; Rodrigues 2003), Orissa (Mallebrein 2007), South India (Bolle 1983) and, prominently, in Nepal. For the most part, these blood sacrifices centre on the Goddess and other 'wild' (*ugra*) deities (Nw. *hiphah dyah*, lit. 'blood-receiving deities'), among them Ganesa and Bhairava.<sup>3</sup> Here, blood not only flows in the rituals, but is also visible in the iconography of the Goddess:<sup>4</sup> Durga Mahisasuramardini stretches out her tongue in order to prevent drops of the demon's blood falling on the soil and thus giving birth to new demons; blood drips from skulls or heads that she has cut off; Tripurabhairavi's breasts are smeared with blood (Rao 1990: 54); Candika is said to reside in blood (*Lalitāsahasra*: see Wilke 1996: 131); Chinnamasta sits in an ocean of blood, and so forth.<sup>5</sup> Comparatively recent are the blood cults and visualizations to be found in posters and videos in two instances of martyrdom: the Tamil Tigers and the Maoist movement in Nepal. To the latter I will return below, but, as mentioned, my main concern in this chapter is the ideology and visibility of blood sacrifices in Nepal, especially among the Hindu and Buddhist Newars.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> On wild goddesses in South Asia see Michaels, Vogelsanger, and Wilke (1996). See also Gellner (1992: 74–80) for the Newar pantheon and blood-receiving deities.

<sup>4</sup> In Bengal this bloodthirstiness becomes more and more re-interpreted by a process that McDermott has described as the sweetening of the goddess: devotees insist that the "goddess is not really blood-thirsty; her *other* devotees have misunderstood her. What she truly desires is the blood of the heart's devotion" (McDermott 1996: 394; original emphasis).

<sup>5</sup> For the bloody imaginaries of the Goddess, see also the 'Chapter on Blood' (*rudhirādhyāya*) of the Kalika Purana.

<sup>6</sup> "Blood sacrifice is a pervasive and enduring aspect of the lives of many Newar Buddhists" (Owens 1993: 266). Sinclair (2008: 4) convincingly shows that this sacrificial practice is not, as many Newars would say, "an ignorant capitulation to Hindu authority", but "is apparently sanctioned at the most basic level, that of the *mūlatantra*. Thus bloody sacrifice, as passed down to Newar Buddhism today, originates in textual traditions of the basic tantras, and the question of 'Hindu' influence here must be pushed back to the early medieval period. This is merely one example of Newar Buddhist practice, casually dismissed as degenerate, which is in fact faithful to its pan-Indian origins."



## BLOOD FOR LIFE

One of the traditional explanations of blood sacrifices, expounded in many theories of sacrifice, is that life is given for life; in other words, it is a form of gift exchange. This is an old argument which one finds as early as in the *Laws of Manu* (ca. 1st–2nd century CE), where such rituals are explicitly justified. It is worth quoting the relevant passage in full, as it demonstrates the basic conflict between permitting animal sacrifices and forbidding the killing of animals<sup>7</sup>—a conflict that helps to explain the ambivalence towards blood rituals in South Asia:

The Self-existent One created domestic animals for sacrifice, and the sacrifice is for the prosperity of this whole world. Within the sacrifice, therefore, killing is not killing. When plants, domestic animals, trees, beasts, and birds die for the sake of sacrifice, they will in turn earn superior births. The honey-mixture, a sacrifice, an offering to gods and ancestors—at no other occasion than these, Manu has declared, may animals be killed. When a twice-born man who knows the true meaning of the Veda kills animals for these purposes, he leads himself and those animals to the highest state. Whether he lives at home, at his teacher's, or in the wilderness, a twice-born man who is self-possessed must never, even in a time of adversity, carry out a killing that is not sanctioned by the Veda. When a killing is sanctioned by the Veda and well-established in this mobile and immobile creation, it should be regarded definitely as a non-killing; for it is from the Veda that the Law has shined forth. (Manu 5.39–44, tr. Olivelle)

Manu also prescribes that the sacrificial meat has to be eaten, even by Brahmins:

If a man refuses to eat meat after he has been ritually commissioned according to rule, after death he will become an animal for twenty-one lifetimes. A Brahmin must never eat animals that have not been consecrated with ritual formulas [that is, mantras]. Abiding by the eternal rule, however, he must eat those that have been consecrated with ritual formulas. (Manu 5.35–36, tr. Olivelle)

Manu is, however, clear in declaring human blood impure. One should for instance not study the Veda when bleeding (Manu 4.122),

<sup>7</sup> The *Laws of Manu*, however, are ambivalent, if not self-contradictory, in their position regarding vegetarianism: see Alsdorf (1962) and Thite (1970) for a more detailed discussion of this problem.

one should never step on blood (4.132), and blood belongs to the twelve bodily impurities (5.135). Human blood stands for sexuality and death, both of which are polluting, and it is opposed to the higher values of chastity, purity, and self-control, which gained supremacy in Brahmanic Hinduism. A sacrificer<sup>8</sup> should therefore not bleed from a wound when letting the blood from the animal flow (Kalika Purana 57.89–90, tr. van Kooij [1972]). Sacrificial blood, however, is purifying and promotes affluence.

The idea that life is given for life may also hold true for the majority of blood sacrifices in Nepal, especially those conducted during Durga Puja during the Dasain festival.<sup>9</sup> In this ritual, almost every Hindu household sacrifices buffaloes, goats, sheep, chicken, ducks, or—as a somewhat smaller gift—eggs.<sup>10</sup> The aim of the offering is to pacify and empower the Great Goddess Mahakali, Dakshinkali, Devi, or Bhagavati, especially in her form as Mahisasuramardini, created by all the gods to kill the terrorizing buffalo demon Mahisa. Through this transformation of life, she ensures new life and prosperity.

In Nepal blood sacrifices are generally given to aniconic *pīṭha* deities, that is, those deities, mostly goddesses, who reside outside the towns. These are regarded as ‘blood-receiving’ gods. However, the same deities often also have an iconic form that is kept inside the town in a special ‘god house’ (Nw. *dyahchē*) where they do not

<sup>8</sup> For Hubert and Mauss (1964), a distinction has to be made between sacrificer and sacrificer. The term sacrificer denotes “the subject to whom the benefits of sacrifice thus accrue, or who undergoes its effects” (10), or in other words, the one who commissions the rite, whereas the sacrificer is the one who “performs the physical activity of sacrifice” (12), that is, the priest.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Krauskopf and Lecomte-Tilouine (1996); Lecomte-Tilouine (2013: 49f.). In Newari the festival is also called *mvahani* (pronounced *mohani*), a name for Durga derived from Mahanavami, ‘the great ninth day’: see Levy (1990: 748 n. 31).

<sup>10</sup> The Kalika Purana (71.3–5 and 95–96) lists “birds, tortoises, crocodiles, fishes, nine species of wild animals, buffaloes, iguanas, bulls, he-goats, mon-gooses, wild boars, rhinoceros, black antelope, *śarabha* (a mythical animal), lion(s), tiger(s), human being(s) and blood from one’s own [the performer’s] body” as adequate sacrifice for Candrika, Bhairava, and other deities. It is through offering sacrifices that the devotee obtains liberation (and) heaven, and, at a price, gains victory over his enemies.

receive animal sacrifices (Pradhan 1986: 281). This means that blood sacrifices are performed in public and not hidden behind the walls of houses.

The pattern of the animal sacrifice (*bali*, *balidān*) is by and large the same. A male animal, which should not have any defects, is worshipped with vermilion and flowers. It (or more precisely the deity to which it is sacrificed and which possesses the animal as indicated by its trembling) has to assent to the sacrifice and is then either exsanguinated or decapitated; the sacrificial animal must not just be strangled, strung up, or choked. Blood, the juice or essence of life, has to flow, in public, on the streets and in courtyards. The animal is held in such a way that the blood is sprayed from the arteries on and around the image of the deity: the goddess "must be made swollen with blood" (Kalika Purana 57.20, tr. van Kooij [1972]). It has to be visible on the soil and the walls of the temple or shrine. Some parts of the body—the head (usually with a lighted wick in its mouth), the tail, the blown up intestines as garlands, and the first piece of the torso—are given as a gift to the goddess. The remaining meat parts are used by the chief worshipper (sacrifier) and his family or clan or caste group for a festive meal.

How are these blood sacrifices justified religiously? Most participants in blood sacrifices would say that the sacrificer, the sacrificer, and even the victim will benefit from the killing, whether by accumulating religious merit or reaching heaven or a higher rebirth.

A more sophisticated justification is found in the Kalika Purana (71.20–22) (tr. van Kooij [1972]): "Blood purified by the recitation of mantras over it and the head (of a victim) are said to be nectar; in the worship (of Devi) the adept worshipper should offer flesh rarely (if at all) except blood and the head which (two) become nectar."<sup>11</sup> The blood works to placate her anger and to strengthen her in the battle with demons, as many Newars believe:

The Newars believe that 'the more you kill, the more you win' (*sāyko tāyko*), i.e., the more animals they sacrifice, the more power (*śakti*) they acquire in their ventures... Thus the animal sacrifices made by devotees have many meanings. At one level, they are commemorating or imitating the killing of the demons by the Goddess, and both pleasing as well propitiating her.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from Kane (1974: 165f.).

At another level, blood sacrifices give power to the Goddess as well as to the devotees to defeat evil forces. There is an underlying, muted belief that the Goddess is unable to defeat the demons without the energy and power (*śakti*) released by the sacrifices. The vital life force in the physical form of blood is similar to the fiery energy (*tejas*) of the gods out of which she emerged. (Pradhan 1986: 299)

The goddess then returns the power given to her through the sacrifices and thus guarantees him or her a better and longer life.

Another (more esoteric) motif is based on the idea that the Goddess purifies the blood of the sacrificer and thus gives him a *new* life. This view is expressed in the Bengali *Śrīśrīkālīpūjāpaddhati* of 1982, a ritual manual based on Kṛṣṇānanda Āgamavāgīśa's *Tantrasāra* (around 1580).<sup>12</sup> In this text, the he-goat, speaking in the first person, desires that his blood be transformed by death into the quality of *subuddhi*, 'good understanding':

The *bhāva*, or emotional–intellectual essence represented by the blood of the 'animal' (*paśu*) wishes to achieve that of divinity. The animal expresses a desire to be born again as a man in its next life. A subsequent mantra further purifies the goat by destroying its 'animal bonds' (*paśupāśa*). (Samanta 1994: 788)

In Samanta's view, these notions represent "common goals of sacrificer and animal—those of a refined faculty of perception, and better rebirth" (1994: 790). The sacrificer, animal-like in his lack of perception and desiring enlightenment, essentially offers his own animal-quality (*paśubhāva*) or demonic quality (*āsurikbhāva*), which is digested by the Goddess and transformed to a higher state or rebirth.

In rare cases even one's own blood (*ātmabali*) may be offered, when "the sacrificer offers the deity blood from his or her chest at points of particular crisis in their lives" (Samanta 1994: 782; see also White 2003: 71). The *Kalika Purana* (60.30) (tr. van Kooij [1972]) also prescribes sacrifice with one's own blood, and people are aware of it: for example at the Gadhimai temple in Bariyarpur, where over 200,000 animals were slaughtered in 2009 (see below and Postscript). "The Devi actually wished for human sacrifices. Since that is impossible today, we sacrifice animals. We offer human blood before convening the ritual

<sup>12</sup> In the following I refer to Samanta (1994: 788–91).

of animal sacrifice though," says Mangal Chaudhary, the main priest of that temple. And the devotee Dukhan Kachhadiya of Simaragaon, who "every five years cuts open his forehead, his right ear, tongue, right chest and his right thigh", adds: "The Devi asks for human blood. If I do not offer my blood, people will die vomiting blood" (*Kathmandu Post*).<sup>13</sup>

In Bhaktapur it is the ideal that the chief worshipper should kill the animal himself, though in most cases the impure Dyahla caste, which previously had also been responsible for executions but now lives mostly from street cleaning, and the Khadgi or buffalo butchers, immolate the animals. For the Tantric *āgā* deities it is "the acting head of the household or *phukī* whether king ... Brahman, or Jośi or any other member of the upper *thars* [who] must cut the throat of the sacrificial animals himself" (Levy 1990: 329). In other cases, the killing can be delegated to the Tantric priest (*ācāju*) or to one of the lower castes. Even then, however, Newar Brahmins and Buddhist Vajracharyas participate in blood sacrifices and eat sacrificial meat (Levy 1990: 325).

The *Durgārcanapaddhati* (cf. Kane 1974: 166) says that the animal should face the east and mantras should be recited when it is cut with a knife or sword that has to be worshipped:

One should worship the sword by contemplating it, reciting the mantra: "Thou art Caṇḍikā's tongue, thou leadest me into the world of the gods, *Oṃ aiṃ hrīm śrīm*". (One should contemplate it) as being Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu), (Śiva) in whose hand is the bow, and as having Kālarātrī's nature; as being terrific, with bloody eyes and mouth, with a garland of blood and whose unguent consists of blood, wearing a garment of blood, having a noose in his hand, a householder who drinks blood and eats a lump of raw meat; "the sword, which causes death, the big knife, which has a sharp blade, which is dangerous to approach, which has welfare for its nature, which is victory, O guardian of the law, honour to thee". (Kalika Purana 57.13–14, tr. van Kooij [1972])

In the *Śrīśrīkālīpūjāpaddhati* the sword is called the "axis of knowledge", with which to destroy ignorance (Samanta 1994: 789). The *Durgārcanapaddhati* also says that the blood should be collected in a vessel of clay and be placed before the goddess and offered with the

<sup>13</sup> *Kathmandu Post* (5 December 2009). For Nepalese accounts of human sacrifice, see Michaels (2008: 101–3 *et passim*).

words “This is the blood of the goat; Om, O Jayantī!” and the words “Aim, Hrīm, Śrīm, O Kauśikī! May she be pleased by the blood.” The sacrificer should then make a mark (*tilaka*) on the sacrificer’s forehead with the blood from the sword (Kalika Purana 60.15–16, tr. van Kooij [1972]).

### BLOOD FOR PROSPERITY

Blood is not only given for a better or next life, but also for prosperity and sometimes rather worldly aims, since there is certainly a relationship between fertility or productivity and the Goddess’s wild power: Durga Puja rituals are performed after the rice is harvested; the goddess nourishes the barley that grows on a small area of soil in the houses during the first nine days of Dasain; machines, cars, and even computers that are necessary for work and productivity are worshipped (Figure 6.1). In a way, they are literally re-charged with life.



**Figure 6.1** Minibus and tools worshipped with blood in Bhaktapur on the occasion of Durga Puja, 2005.

Source: A. Michaels, 12 October 2005

This holds also true for an incident that happened on 4 September 2007 at Tribhuvan Airport, Kathmandu, when a goat was sacrificed in the presence of Nepal Airlines (NA) Managing Director Gautam Das Shrestha in front of an NA Boeing 757 as an offering to Akasha Bhairava. Akasha Bhairava's image had been painted on the plane to avoid the jinx associated with the plane after the NA's only operational Boeing was grounded and two attempts to fly to Hong Kong failed because of a defect of the aircraft's anti-ice device.<sup>14</sup>

Let me provide an interim conclusion: The life of the animal is given primarily for a new and better life as well as for the prosperity and power of the individual sacrificer and his family or clan or *guthi* (Lecomte-Tilouine 2013: 41). Epidemic diseases, earthquakes, or floods have befallen the country too often for the anger of the goddesses to be risked. Even the king's or state's sacrifice of 108 buffaloes and more<sup>15</sup> at Hanuman Dhoka or in Gorkha is a private sacrifice, though one that is intended to benefit all subjects and to reaffirm social order and hierarchy. If the king and/or the state fail to strive for prosperity through their support of sacrifices, people get angry. This happened in 2008, when the Government did not provide funds for the traditional buffalo sacrifice at the end of Indra Jatra. The then Finance Minister and Maoist leader Dr Baburam Bhattarai had boldly decided not to allocate funds to Guthi Samsthan and Kaushi Toshakana for various exorbitant animal sacrifices. Even a ten-point agreement was not satisfactory; the large pole of Indra Jatra was pulled down without sacrifice in the early morning of the tenth day. In response, massive demonstrations in Kathmandu were organized and many Newars rioted. Bhattarai folded and the allocated funds were again given to the institutions. Nepali BBC's Sajha Sawal then ironically asked: "Will the government buy Christmas presents for Christians too?"<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The photographer Bikash Karki from *Kantipur Publications*, who took the picture and sent it to the *Kathmandu Post*, was detained for four hours.

<sup>15</sup> According to *eKantipur* (18 October 2013), in 2013 "Kathmanduites are estimated to have feasted on Rs 1 billion worth of meat during Dashain... According to the Nepal Livestock Buying and Selling Association, the valley's carnivorous revellers swallowed the flesh of 58,000 goats and 1,500 buffaloes from the Kalanki market alone. Nepal Food Corporation sold another 2,788 goats during the feast."

<sup>16</sup> Dr Ramesh Khatry, *Kathmandu Post* of 17 October 2008.

## BLOOD FOR PROTECTION

As discussed earlier, blood sacrifices at Dasain are also collective events and markers of communality and difference. This can be demonstrated in the case of Navadurga rituals<sup>17</sup> in Bhaktapur.<sup>18</sup> The bloodthirstiness of these goddesses is explained in legends:<sup>19</sup>

During the reign of King Gunakamadeva (or according to another version, Suvarna Malla) in the 12–13<sup>th</sup> century a group of Nine Durgas regularly killed people of this city and drank their blood. Only a Tantric *ācāju* priest could placate the goddesses and even make them immovable. In this miserable situation, the Durgas agreed not to kill the citizens any more. The priest, called Sunananda Āchaju, reduced the goddesses in size and took them in a basket to his house in the city where he worshipped them regularly. However, the Brahman Tantric priest Somara Rajopadhyaya thought that Sunananda would not be able to worship the goddesses appropriately due to his low caste status. He took the goddesses to his house and taught them to dance using his hands. One day he had to go to Varanasi. He strictly ordered his wife not to enter the puja room. However, she was very curious and so she opened the room. Immediately, she was killed by the Durgas who escaped and also killed a pig whose blood they drank. After the Brahman priest returned he could not take the goddesses back to his house since they had become impure but he arranged that they would embody themselves every year for nine months in the bodies of the Gathas, a caste of florists. This is why the Navadurgas dance for nine months in Bhaktapur and always ask for blood sacrifices.

The Navadurgas' desire for blood can be observed time and again in Bhaktapur. For instance, on the day after full moon the Navadurga dancers rip open the abdominal wall of a piglet and drink its blood, and on the ninth day of Dasain they kill a large, well-fed buffalo (Nw. *khāme*) that young people have previously driven out as a scapegoat to the Brahmayani temple. This ritual is secret, but on the next day one

<sup>17</sup> On the Navadurgas, see Teilhet (1978), Gutschow and Basukala (1987), Gutschow (1996), Korvald (1994), and Levy (1990).

<sup>18</sup> On Bhaktapur's city structures, see especially Gutschow (1982), Gutschow and Kölver (1975), and Levy (1990).

<sup>19</sup> For versions of the myth, see Wright (1877: 154–5), Levy (1990: 503ff.), and Gutschow and Basukala (1987). What follows is my summary of the myth as given in these sources.



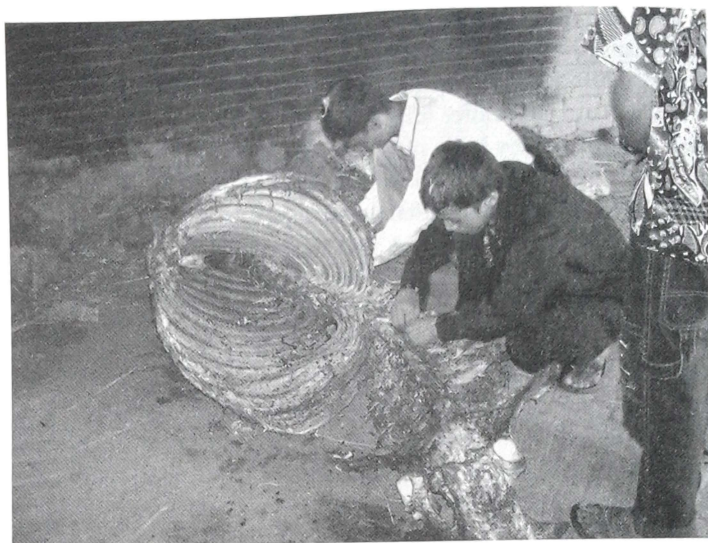
can see what has happened during the night: the Navadurgas' white clothes are covered in blood and more blood is kept in a large pot that is carried through the city together with the buffalo's head during the following days. Only after fifteen days do they touch the blood with their lips and eat the brain of the animal. Wherever the Navadurgas are invited to dance they demand animal sacrifices, sometimes *pañcabali*, that is, five animals (buffalo, sheep, goat, pig, and chicken).

Until recently, the king too had to worship the Navadurgas in Bhaktapur and was then *horribile dictu* (seen from an orthodox Indian *smārta* 'vegetarian' point of view) confronted with the blood-smeared dresses of the dancers who are to protect the city as a collective. In this case blood does not only flow for the sake of individuals and their families but also for the city as a whole and the Goddess digests the evil of all citizens materialized in the blood of the *khāme* buffalo, because "the animal that embodies disorder is a gathering of the whole society" (Lecomte-Tilouine 2013: 52).

## BLOOD FOR ALLIANCES

In Bhaktapur the Navadurga dancers represent the seats (*pitha*) of the 'Mothers' and the goddess Tripurasundari who surround and protect the city (Gutschow 1996). The Navadurga are expected to dance in all 21 traditional city quarters and sometimes beyond. They are an essential and ever-present part of the city's identity. Even the Marxist-Leninist-dominated city administration supports them by paying for a new house for the ritual objects, drums, and masks of the goddesses that the Gatha wear when dancing. The king or, since his deposition, the state government, pays for the sacrificial victim at Dasain, making the sacrifice a public event and thus supporting the city's solidarity and identity.

This solidarity is seen when on the ninth day of Dasain almost every citizen of Bhaktapur heads for the shrine of Brahmayani in order to rip a tiny little piece of meat from the *khāme* buffalo until only the skeleton remains (Figure 6.2). After all, the goddess has returned the sacrificed animal as an offering (*prasada*) of which nothing must be thrown away. Therefore the horn will be sent to the temple; the skin will be given to the leatherworkers; a soup will be cooked from the claws; the head will be divided into nine pieces



**Figure 6.2** The skeleton of the *khamé* buffalo, Bhaktapur.

Source: A. Michaels, 12 October 2005.

according to traditional patterns (Gutschow and Michaels 2005: 121) and then distributed among the *pujaris* of the Navadurga shrines; and the intestines will be blown up and hung around the various deities as garlands.

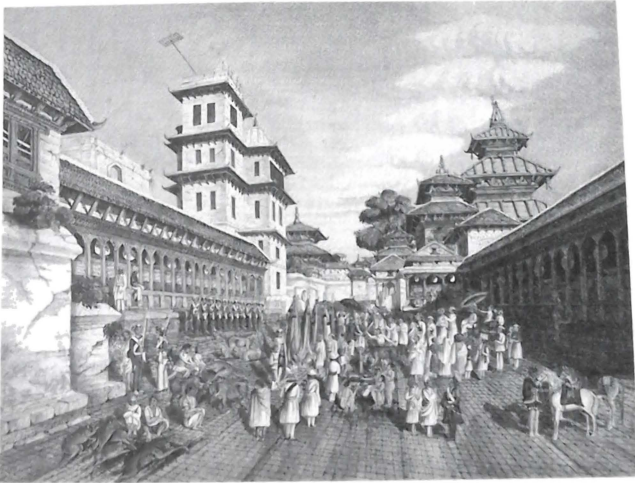
Sacred bloodletting means killing, and inhibitions regarding killing are as widespread among Newars as any other social group. The guilt of killing is somewhat alleviated by the sharing and joint consumption of the meat, and by the fact that the first piece is brought to a pollution-absorbing stone in front of the house (Nw. *pikha lakhu*). The guilt is also shared when all participants mark their forehead with a finger which has been smeared with blood, or when they share the meat in a communal meal in *guthis*, that is, groups of members of different castes for certain purposes (for example, funerals: *si guthi*).<sup>20</sup>

"The corporate group eats it" (the sacrificial meat), says Robert Levy (1990: 335), and he points out that the meal is a joyful event

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Toffin (2005), Levy (1990: 335).

resulting in solidarity. Indeed, “sacrifice can be seen as the solemnization of food and its distribution at a communal meal” (Heesterman 1993: 10). The act of killing remains immoral but becomes sanctified through “*the* antinomial act in which all levels of society participate” (Levy 1990: 332–3; original emphasis). Very often fights over meat break out, if it is felt that the portions have not been distributed equally or that the sacrificial animal was not appropriate (cf. Michaels 2008: 99).

In fact, the meat has to be shared. Military personnel and the staff of the palace or government, for instance, share the meat of the Dasain animal sacrifices at Mulchowk, according to a fixed plan of distribution. Previously, the king even had to be present on this occasion (as an Oldfield painting shows: see Figure 6.3). The sacrifice was an event to mark his superiority through his right to distribute the



**Figure 6.3** Dasain sacrifices at Mul Chowk, Hanuman Dhoka, Kathmandu, in the presence of the king (on the right), from Oldfield, around 1854.

Source: The British Library Board WD 3280.

meat. According to a legend it was King Jayasthiti Malla who forced the Buddhists to eat sacrificial meat.<sup>21</sup>

However, the way in which the meat is sacrificed and shared also marks differences and commonalities, as the case of the *kul puja* sacrifices among the Bahun–Chhetri, described in Chapter 7, also demonstrates. The Newars cut the throat so that death results from exsanguination, the Indo–Parbatiyas decapitate the animal; the Newars sacrifice buffaloes, Brahmans offer he-goats. Some Newars prepare a kind of cake from the coagulated blood and collect the remaining blood (Figure 6.4), whereas the Indo–Parbatiyas would not do so. Some take only the blood from male animals, others also from female animals. In this way the blood sacrifice becomes a large ritual kitchen



**Figure 6.4** Sharing meat and blood in Bhaktapur.

Source: A. Michaels, 11 October 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Gellner (1992: 87) referring to A.K. Vajracharya's *Būgadyo Nepāle Hahgu Khā* (1980).

for commensal groups in which the distribution and preparation of blood and meat indicate social differences, status, and control.

### BLOOD FOR MARTYRDOM: MAOIST SACRIFICE

In the introduction above I mentioned the lack of indigenous reflections on the symbolism of blood. There is one exception to this generalization: the Maoist movement. As Anne de Sales (2003), Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (2004a, 2013), and Tessa Pariyar (2009) have superbly described and analysed, the Maoists adapted the Durga and blood imaginary, transforming the blood-for-protection idea to the level of martyrdom. According to Maoist beliefs, the martyr's blood "forms blood-seeds (*raktabij*) that germinate in the land and give birth to 100 warriors" (Lecomte-Tilouine 2004a: 52) as the blood of the Mahiṣa or his attendant Raktabija demon gives birth to new demons when it drops on the soil (Devi Mahatmya 8.42–63) so that Kali has to drink all his blood in order to devour his blood-born offspring:

*timī ek mār, u say hunecha. timī say mār, u hajār hunecha. yo ta raktabij ho,  
u mṛtyū mā jiune garcha.*

If you kill one, he will become a hundred; if you kill hundred, they will become a thousand. Whoever is a blood-seed will bring life in his death. (Song *Janatā-ko sunāulo rāj āundaicha* by Kshitij Parivar, quoted from Pariyar 2009: 105 and audio clip 4)

The Maoists apparently do not identify themselves with Kali but with the demons, in order to liberate the people. They often also regard the People's War as a kind of sacrifice (*bali*) in which the metaphor of blood plays a prominent role:<sup>22</sup> the blood of the martyrs is said to "irrigate the culture (*kheti*) of the People's War" (p. 53); poems are "written with the blood of the martyrs" (p. 54); they build a 'blood family' (*raktim parivar*); they speak of the 'revolution of blood' (*rak-takranti*); they offer their last drop of blood to their mothers;<sup>23</sup> the mother of a revolutionary warrior says: "My son must bring the hot

<sup>22</sup> All of the following examples are from Lecomte-Tilouine (2004a). See also Gaenszle (1991: 255–6), who was among the first to point out the relation between *balidana* and martyrdom.

<sup>23</sup> See the song *Mero ragat-le* (Pariyar 2009: 104 and video clip 7).

blood of the enemies to me, because it is necessary that I drink some before dying" (p. 55); the warriors collect "the martyr's blood (or a handful of earth mixed with it, or a symbolic red powder) and [place] it on the forehead as a visible sign of this unification" (p. 57); and the enemies, that is, the state forces, are seen as demons who drink the blood of innocent people (pp. 61 and 64). Thus, "the entire ideology [of the 'People's War'] was formulated in sacrificial terms" (Lecomte-Tilouine 2013: 39; cf. Lecomte-Tilouine 2009, Chapter 9).

Lecomte-Tilouine rightly points out the parallels between the Goddess and the revolutionary fighters as follows:

[T]he Goddess shares similarities with the red warriors, since she too was born as a terrible red female soldier from the anger of the assembled ghosts. Traditionally, the destruction of the evil forces by the Goddess is re-enacted each year by the Hindu king (or his representative) through a sacrifice of buffaloes. This sacrifice differs radically from the Brahmanic type of sacrifice, since the victim does not represent the self but the enemy's forces. This explains why this type of sacrifice is clearly a prerogative of the ultimate tenant of power. It is therefore a kingly model, a Kshātriya [sic] modality.

The People's War, interestingly, seems to have combined the two models of sacrifice in its archaeological architecture: the Brahmanic and ascetic self-sacrifice to the fire is adopted as the model presiding over the Maoists' side, while the kingly destruction of demonic forces is one facet of their struggle against the rotten 'royal' side. In addition, the Maoists incorporate an image of their own power as one that spreads terror, for they frequently employ the idea of their demonic power of multiplication through the contact of their blood with the earth. (Lecomte-Tilouine 2004a: 67–8)

Thus, the warrior's self-sacrifice in the people's liberation war is seen as a kind of self-sacrifice or self-sacrificial gift (*balidan*, cf. Lecomte-Tilouine 2004b: 15). However, despite its links to the blood of animal sacrifices, the public display of human blood in posters and videos is rooted in the cult of martyrdom and therefore belongs to a different category: it is not the real blood that, following animal sacrifices, can be seen in temples, streets, and public spaces; in most cases, it has become a metaphor that is mainly used for political struggles and that has motivated many young people to 'sacrifice' themselves to produce a better life and a more prosperous Nepal. Thus, the Maoists

were the first in Nepal to enact publicly a radical transformation of the idea of blood sacrifice.

## BLOOD FOR NO REASON

All this bloodshed happens at the northern periphery of the South Asia, which is usually known rather for its vegetarianism and for the highly valued norm of *ahimsa*, the most prominent precept against injuring living beings.<sup>24</sup> In India, animal protection has been enshrined in the Constitution and several laws, such as the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act of 1960 (which, however, in Section 28 does allow animal sacrifices: "Nothing contained in this Act shall render it an offence to kill any animal in a manner required by the religion of any community"). Furthermore, some states have passed the Animal and Birds Sacrifices (Prevention) Act that prohibits the killing of animals for any religious purpose. It was the colonial government that branded animal sacrifices as savage, unhygienic, superstitious, brutal, and uncivilized (Tanaka 1999; Mallebrein 2007: 451f.). Since then animal sacrifices have come to be regarded as violating the norms and values of a modern, civilized state, and as backward, driven by commercial interests, unholy, and cruel.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, blood sacrifices in India, along with their fear and pain, have for the most part been removed from the gaze of public space.

Nepal, however, remained to a considerable degree unaffected by colonial influences and the conflict between modern or 'civilized' forms of meat production and traditional or 'archaic' forms of animal sacrifices. This is now changing. However, in addition to constant Theravada Buddhist campaigns to discourage blood sacrifices and to replace them with non-violent rituals, and to the Maoist ban on sacrifices, which they treated as a feudal religious relic, it seems it was predominantly Nepal's opening up to the West, especially with

<sup>24</sup> See Alsdorf (1962); Chappel (1993); Houben and Kooij (1999); for Nepal, Gellner (1992: 124–5).

<sup>25</sup> Apparently it was the Communist Party, and not religious groups, that was most active in fighting against the animal sacrifices involved in the Vedic fire sacrifice organized in Kerala in 1975 by Frits Staal (Michael Witzel, personal comm., 25 May 2012).

tourism and the influence of NGOs, that significantly contributed to the growing condemnation of and discomfort with animal sacrifices. Nowadays, opinions such as the following are widespread even among Hindus:

Give up sacrifice—With two days left for Maha Astami, the temples will be littered with blood oozing from the bodies of goats and ducks. It is shameful that we Nepali sacrifice such a large number of animals. Offering vegetables and vegetable products should be encouraged. In most parts of India, animal sacrifice is banned. However in Nepal, animal sacrifice is carried out with government initiation. More than 200 thousand animals are sacrificed during Gadhimai Mela while 108 buffaloes are killed in Royal palace in Gorkha. The most tragic part is that the government itself finances such mass killings of animals. Let's celebrate Dashain this time giving up violence and cruelty to animals. Sacrifice means to give up, so let's all give up 'bali' system for good. (Barsha Ghimire, Letter to the Editor, 10 October 2005, *Kathmandu Post*)

Mr Ghimire complains about the streams of blood that flow annually during Dasain, and every year there are more such voices to be heard. He summarizes the main points of the growing criticism that accompanies the Dasain killings every year: the financial support from the government, the cruelty, and the violence of the acts.

This criticism reached a peak during the ritual killing of thousands of animals at the Gadhimai festival on 25 and 26 November 2009, in Bariyarpur in the Bara district, 20 kilometres east of Birgunj. Gadhimai is a forest deity patronized by the Sen Dynasty of Makwanpur. According to legends, the festival started in the mid-eighteenth century when the feudal lord Bhagwan Chaudhary was imprisoned at Makwanpur and dreamt that he could be freed if he offered a blood sacrifice to Gadhimai. International press media called this ritual, which is performed every five years, the biggest animal slaughter of all time. It is reported that about 250,000 buffaloes, goats, and other animals were slaughtered. According to a report from the online *Guardian*, Chandan Dev Chaudhary, a Gadhimai priest, said he was satisfied with the festival's high attendance. "The goddess needs blood," he said, "then that person can make his wishes come true" (Lang 2009).

Several animal rights activists, especially the Animal Welfare Network Nepal (AWN), complained about this event, saying that the animals were transported haphazardly and were not given water



before the sacrifice, that knives were not sharpened, that there were no drainage facilities for the blood, and that the carcasses were not removed quickly enough. Generally it took the butchers a long time to kill each buffalo; many were not dispatched with just one stroke.<sup>26</sup> AWNN wanted the organizers to pierce the ears of the animals to let some blood flow, but it did not succeed in its petition. The campaign received the support of celebrities and activists, such as Maneka Gandhi,<sup>27</sup> Ram Bahadur Bomjan (the Buddha boy), and Brigitte Bardot, who had petitioned the Nepali Prime Minister, Madhav Kumar Nepal, about the issue. But the government, which had donated £36,500 to the event, did not intend to terminate the sacrifices.

Jenny Rolness, a Norwegian activist, protested in a letter to the editor of the *Kathmandu Post*, pointing out that Nepal is known as a nation of peace, continuing:

Bloodstained temples, religious festivals where people walk barefoot in blood, the massacre of hundreds of thousands of animals, shivering in fright as they await their turn in the death row—how can anybody believe that this is the way to worship God? It seems that people measure God by their own yardstick, believing that he is as cruel as humans are. If God exists, he surely doesn't demand the blood of his most pure, innocent and helpless creatures... Children and adults are being brutalised by the violence towards animals, so commonly seen that every tourist visiting must expect to witness it ... Participants believe that animal sacrifices for the Hindu goddess Gadhimai will end evil and bring prosperity. But inflicting pain, fear and death on others is an act of evil, and will only serve to brutalise society. (*Kathmandu Post*, 26 November 2009)

In Nepal many animal welfare organizations, often supported by donors from India, Europe, or the USA, organize protests against blood sacrifices: Bhaktapur Animal Welfare Society, the Society for Animal Welfare and Management (SAWM), the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCAN), the Devoted Radical Environment Animal Movement Society (DREAMS), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA Nepal), and so forth. Animal

<sup>26</sup> As reported in the *Kathmandu Post* (27 November 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Maneka Gandhi is chairperson of India's largest animal welfare organization People for Animals and of the Delhi Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Mallebrein 2007: 447).

Nepal ('A Voice for the Voiceless', [www.animalnepal.org](http://www.animalnepal.org)) is an NGO based in Patan that cares for stray dogs and working equines. The Animal Welfare Network Nepal informs tourists about temples with and without animal sacrifices, publishes information material on cruelty to animals, and a calendar or planner with important days for animals, for example, World Dog Biscuit Appreciation Day (February, 23), Respect for Chicken Day (May 4), and World Cat Day (August 8). This organization gives significant support to campaigns against animal sacrifice, distributes stickers (*paśubali banda garaū*: 'let's stop animal sacrifice'), and encourages vegetarian offerings (cf. also the discussion in Chapter 7, this volume):

The Animal Welfare Network Nepal and Vedic Society oppose blood sacrifices and promote vegetarian offerings for a harmonious society. Ban 'red temples' and promote 'green temples'. Introduce vegetarian offerings in your family and neighborhood. Write letters to the government, army and organizing committees. (Poster "Stop Animal Sacrifice—Promote Vegetarian Offerings")<sup>28</sup>

Also active against animal sacrifices but perhaps less influential are highly respected Vaishnava or Buddhist individuals such as Dr Govinda Tandan (2009: 138f.) and Ratna Kaji Vajracharya (1993), who propose substitutes for each animal sacrifice (Figure 6.5). Thus, rather practical and mundane concerns about the welfare of the animals before and during the slaughter are mixed up with various religious claims.

The results of such campaigns and voices are more and more visible. In Buddhist Patan, there are almost no animal sacrifices anymore; 20–30 years ago even Buddhist families would call somebody at Dasain to slaughter for them. Instead, substitutes have become more and more common: an egg or a pumpkin (Mallebrein 2007), although in the Vedic tradition vegetable offerings are also regarded as killing: "the text uses the verb *hanti*, 'to slay, kill,' here" (Heesterman 1993: 9). Also popular is the offering of (Nw./Np.) *samay(a)* (or *samay baji*), that is, a small cold meal of flattened rice (*baji*), popped rice, dried fish, roasted meat of the sacrificial animal, an egg, black soybeans, and raw ginger.

<sup>28</sup> See [www.stopanimalsacrifice.org](http://www.stopanimalsacrifice.org) (consulted in 2012, but virtually defunct by 2015).



**Figure 6.5** Pumpkin as substitute during Durga Puja, Kathmandu.

*Source:* A. Zotter, 1 November 2007.

## BLOOD FOR RESISTANCE AGAINST THE WEST

"The voices of supporters of animal sacrifice, although a majority of the population, are barely represented in the public debate," Cornelia Mallebrein rightly states (2007: 445). They are under-represented in the press media and on the internet. However, in Nepal such opinions are also made public. Interestingly, such defences of blood sacrifices are directed against the West, as a means of resistance against modern society, rather than defending the traditional notion of giving life for life. Thus, in a letter to the editor titled 'Our religious right', Puran B. Lama responds to the letter of the Norwegian activist Jenny Rolness mentioned above:

They are practicing their faith and let no one, especially someone living in Scandinavia, complain... I will not judge the American people, for instance, for the number of turkeys they are going to kill for Thanksgiving. Let no one judge Nepalis for practising their religion. (*Kathmandu Post*, 27 November 2009)

And Sushma Joshi, who holds an MA degree from the New School for Social Research, New York, defends animal sacrifices in her *Kathmandu Post* column 'The Global and the Local' under the title 'Are We Civilized Yet?'

Of course, culture doesn't excuse everything. But for those of us jaded by the hidden slaughterhouses of the U.S.A. and Europe, where animals are stunned with electric stun guns and killed in much larger masses every day, the Gadhimai sacrifice can appear to be just a tiny blip of self-righteous protest from the Western world. How many Gadhimai-like sacrifices happen every single day on cattle farms across the meat-eating West? Nepal, incidentally has a poor population for whom meat remains a luxury—for many of those doing sacrifice, this may be the only meat they will eat throughout the entire year. So there is just a tiny bit of hypocrisy associated with those who protest this event—if only because the global footprint of meat consumption is so much more gigantic on the Western world.

Gadhimai brings to surface what happens every single day on cattle farms across the planet. People sacrifice gigantic numbers of animals everyday, especially for those populations that eat meat more than twice a day. The only difference is that we see the crudeness with which animals are killed in this event. (Joshi 2009)

One year later, the author writes in the same column, this time titled 'Behind the Veil':

As I've written before, I think these issues tend to be more complicated than a mere *blood sacrifice is akin to barbarity* equation. Inhabitants of Western countries ingest meat from live animals every single day, for three meals. To me, this amounts to more barbarity than a once-a-year event where families behead a goat who's been grazing in fresh pastures, and which is killed with one swift stroke of a knife. The low-carbon footprint of a family ingesting a goat in Dasain is far more civilized than any European and American diet on the planet.

Yet discourse insists that the goat-sacrifice is the height of barbarity, not the sausage, bacon and eggs breakfast that puts trillion more animals in misery in factories where they are bred under horrific conditions, pumped full of antibiotics and hormones, killed in mass numbers with electric shock-guns, and packed in neat civilized plastic for the world to enjoy.

People in the West never see where their meat comes from. It's clean and bloodless as it lies under plastic and glass in a supermarket freezer. They've never seen the farms where the animals are bred. For Nepalis, we

know what we are eating. We see the animals struggling as they are put in taxis. We see them terrified as they are taken to the killing fields. We see the body beheaded. We see the blood ...

The paradox of civilisation begs the question: Why do Europeans and Americans, who are so civilized and no longer sacrifice to a higher being, continue their brutal sacrifice to human beings on the field of war? Iraq, Afghanistan ... the bloody mines and fields of Africa where European companies continue to sacrifice children and women and men on the fertile land to satiate their own Gods of Materialism, Modernisation and Civilisation ...

Can overtly bloody sacrifice be, in the long run, less bloody than a sanitized, plastic wrapped one? Does a goddess who asks for blood in one moment make you see the value of eating animals the next? Are these things more complicated than they appear to the civilized eye? (Joshi 2010)

To be sure, Sushma Joshi idealizes the right to sacrifice animals, making it a part of Nepalese identity, and ignores the 13,000 victims of the Maoist insurrection or the fact that cruel animal farms to provide for growing meat demands also exist in Nepal. However, in a way she unveils the hypocrisy in many animal welfare movements and critiques of animal sacrifices.

Sushma Joshi's question, whether animal sacrifices brutalize society and make people cruel and criminal, has been taken up by Puran B. Lama in the letter to the *Kathmandu Post* quoted above:

Animal Sacrifice to Goddess Durga is a basic practice in Hinduism. I have a Chettri friend in whose family every male member is taught to cut a goat with a khukuri (in a single stroke) by the time he is 14 or 15. It is a rite of passage into adulthood. My friend cut his first goat at 15 and his first buffalo at 16. He is middle-aged today and has committed no crime in his entire life. (*Kathmandu Post*, 27 November 2009)<sup>29</sup>

Thus, in reaction to criticism from the West and within Nepal, people have started to defend animal sacrifices and consider them as

<sup>29</sup> Antje Vollmer (1995: 18–23), a prominent member of the German Green Party and former vice-president of the German parliament, takes a similar position. Having travelled often to Bhaktapur and having observed several animal sacrifices, partly together with her then young son, she argues that Nepali society is comparatively peaceful, since it leaves space for blood shedding whereas ethicized religions move this violence out of rituals and public spaces, which leads to violence within society.

part of their national identity. This debate is ongoing, and it will be fascinating to see whether Nepal wants to keep animal sacrifices in the public sphere or whether it will follow the Indian way and increasingly prohibit such blood rituals.

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Most people in Nepal do not concern themselves much with the ethics of animal sacrifices (cf. Chapter 7). Apart from the debates in the media, there is little awareness of the set of problems regarding these events. For most people in Bhaktapur blood sacrifices are natural, something that has to be performed. Asha Bahadur Banmala, a Navadurga dancer from Bhaktapur, expresses this view laconically. Asked why so much blood is necessary during Dasain he simply says: "We don't know, but it has to be!" As Marie Lecomte-Tilouine aptly says "(t)he vast majority of the population consider blood sacrifice to be the most effective way to obtain a boon, to satisfy the gods, or to contain or divert these divinities' anger" (Lecomte-Tilouine 2013: 39).

Even priests and other ritual specialists who are familiar with performing blood sacrifices rarely give elaborate explanations. The theological background mostly depends on the Kali myth cycle. Apart from this reference and the recent martyrdom notion among the Maoists, blood metaphors are normally absent in Nepali and even South Asian imaginaries and visualizations. This is in sharp contrast to the integration of blood sacrifices and metaphors in all Abrahamic religions.

Recent arguments against animal sacrifice in Nepal focus more on sacrifice as a violation of the trans-cultural norms and values of a civilized state (order, hygiene, public cruelty, commercial interests, and so forth) and less on ethical or religious considerations. The traditional notions of blood for life, protection, or social alliances that I have described do not play a large role in public debates. Nor do esoteric Tantric explanations. I therefore conclude that many arguments directed against animal sacrifices in Nepal have to do with the visibility of blood in the public sphere and in the streets of a modern city rather than religious, ethical, or moral reservations in the first instance. The reason must be seen in the fact that the West, still for many educated Nepalis the model of modernity, has made blood and

death invisible in public, expelling them from the cities to animal factories and slaughterhouses hidden in suburbs or in the countryside. Blood in public has become something impure connected to immoral violence and brutality. Thus, the materiality of blood has been linked with morality. Animals are killed but their blood is tabooed. In the public eye, in South Asia and across the world, the 'civilizing process' affords a clean, sanitized, and hygienic public space, but this might in itself be a sacrifice of seeing what it means to kill animals. The temples in Nepal may not be soaked with blood anymore; they have yielded to the sterile, tiled counter of the butcher. But this apparently unavoidable transformation consigns the violence of death to remote spheres from where it may erupt even more ferociously.

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In my conclusion I asked whether Nepal wants to keep animal sacrifices in the public sphere or whether it will follow the Indian way and increasingly prohibit such blood rituals. Meanwhile, on 28–9 November 2014, another Gadhimai festival at Bariyarpur in Bara district took place and the reactions to it support Sylvain Lévi's famous aphorism that Nepal is India in the making. Little by little the modern state is moving towards the prohibition of blood sacrifice on grounds that have little to do with religion and more with morality and hygiene. As a result several organizations and individuals are working to make animal sacrifice less vulnerable to attack by reducing their visibility. In fact it is the Gadhimai festival that provokes the most criticism of blood sacrifices—though little public protest on the streets—while many other animal sacrifices that are performed in Nepal almost every day remain widely unreported. Only two weeks after Gadhimai, on the full moon day of Mangsir, about one thousand nanny goats were sacrificed at the Kalika Temple in Namtar in Makwanpur district. As in Bariyarpur, it was the goddess who had instructed a farmer in his dreams to make such an offering.<sup>30</sup> Only one small report appeared in the *Kathmandu Post*, on 7 December 2014. Other local and international media kept silent.

<sup>30</sup> *Kathmandu Post*, 7 December 2014, p. 2.

Several trends and incidents support my argument that blood sacrifice is slowly becoming less and less visible in the public sphere:

- Legal actions: The Supreme Court of India issued an interim order directing the Indian government to prevent the illegal transport of animals across the border from India to Nepal, to be sacrificed at the Gadhimai Temple.<sup>31</sup> However, apparently some devotees sacrificed their animals near the border.<sup>32</sup> In Nepal, three petitions against the Gadhimai sacrifices have been filed at the Supreme Court on grounds that the mass killings of animals is against the Animal Health and Livestock Services Act 1999, the Environment Protection Act 1957, the Contagious Diseases Act 1963, and the Animal Slaughter House and Meat Act 1997. While one group headed by MP Rajya Laxmi Golcha, Manoj Gautam, and others, as well as the petition by Arju Kumar Aryal, wanted the sacrifices to be stopped for good, the group of Gita Prasad Dahal and others only requested that the sacrifices be conducted in a lawful way. The arguments were basically the same as in the 2009 protests: the killing is done unprofessionally, for example, no health check is carried out prior to slaughtering. Moreover, carcasses and blood are spread all over, thereby polluting the environment and potentially spreading contagious diseases. Security reasons have also been cited because three people died in accidents or due to cold during the festival and a stampede was feared.<sup>33</sup> Single bench judge Govinda Kumar Upadhyaya decided in an interim order to the five defendants (the Home Ministry, Police Department Bara, Cultural District Office Bara, Village Development Office Bariyarpur, Gadhimai Festival Organizing Committee) to conduct the Gadhimai festival following the provisions of those acts, specifying, for instance, that sick animals could not be slaughtered and that the carcasses must be removed immediately. The final decision by a bench of two judges will follow in one or two years.

<sup>31</sup> *Republika*, 21 November 2014, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Himalayan Times*, 30 November, 2014, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> *Pahilo Post* (2014).



- Intensified protests by religious leaders: Protests (again) included a number of prominent Nepali and foreign people and celebrities, including Dr Govinda Tandon, scholar and writer Abhi Subedi who wants to “preserve the culture sans the sacrifice of animals,”<sup>34</sup> and again French actress Brigitte Bardot and Maneka Gandhi. For the first time also prominent religious leaders, such as Swami Agnivesh, President of the World Council of Arya Samaj, who visited the site and staged a fast during the festival, joined the protests at the spot, saying: “It is an embarrassment to Nepal and its neighbouring countries that embrace Vedic Sanatan Dharma.”<sup>35</sup>
- Decrease of sacrifices: Due to these protests and legal actions the number of buffaloes and other sacrificed animals decreased considerably. An estimated 10,000–15,000 buffaloes and tens of thousands of other animals were killed by four hundred butchers. Butcher Joginder Patel said: “I really look forward to this. God will bless me for it. It is as easy as cutting vegetables. At the last festival I beheaded 300 buffaloes, but this year I killed only 175.” Likewise Rajesh Shah said: “I promised the goddess that if I made good money in my business, I would sacrifice a goat for her. I’ve heard of the complaints about this festival, but I had already prayed for my business to improve, so I had to keep my promise to the goddess” (Pattissoon 2014).
- Limited access to the premises of the Gadhimai Temple: Media persons and visitors were barred from entering the festival site. Nevertheless, the international media exposure increased considerably. Protest action is known from many places all over the world. A Change.org petition attracted 42,167 signatures; other websites and social media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and so forth were actively used to trigger the protest.
- Strong debate over the status of the sacrificial meat: As in previous Gadhimai festivals, Dalits (Chamars) claimed the dead bodies of the sacrificed animals as their *prasad*. However, this year, the Gadhimai Festival Organizing Committee had sold the buffalo

<sup>34</sup> *Kathmandu Post*, 16 November 2014.

<sup>35</sup> *Himalayan Times*, 14 November 2014, p. 3.

carcasses at a price of Np Rs 510<sup>36</sup> for each buffalo to a contractor (some say in Indonesia, others in China). It is reported that the Dalits had 'stolen' the sacrificial remains in the night. Contrary to most other smaller animals like chicken or goats, the buffalo meat is not consumed by the sacrificers. Instead it is sold and thus builds a big business for just a few people of the organizing committee. The heads of the buffaloes are burnt in a pit. It is said that the goddess only wants the blood and the souls of the animals.

The Gadhimai sacrifices this year almost coincided with the "American Gadhimai," the nationwide Thanksgiving festival, when on 27 November 10 million turkeys were killed. It is not known that similar protests came up, nor are there many reports of significant protests at Bakr Id or Christmas, when millions of animals are also slaughtered. Deepak Adhikari aptly wrote:

I am a non-vegetarian but am against religious animal sacrifices. What troubles me is the vocabulary of the anti-Gadhimai festival: 'barbaric', 'cruel', and 'inhuman'. It's described as the world's 'biggest' and 'scariest' animal sacrifice. The inside of an industrial scale abattoir in Europe is probably just as scary, and the only difference between Gadhimai and Thanksgiving (which both fall on 27 November this year) is that in America tens of millions of turkeys are slaughtered. ( ... ) As some tweeters have pointed out, only a vegetarian has the moral high ground to condemn the killings of any animal for religion, sport or food. (Adhikari 2014)

To be sure, the cruelty of Gadhimai lies in the often brutal form of the killing (frequently the animals are not decapitated with one stroke), its visibility in the media, and in the fact that the animals are not eaten by those who sacrifice them but left scattered around, reminding *República* correspondent Neeraj Chandra Roy of dead bodies lying on the battlefields of the World Wars and asking whether the "threat to humanity is not over as the recent bloodsheds in our country reminds us that many more Hitlers [are] hidden in the dark corners of our hearts."<sup>37</sup> Roy also asks, as many others have: "Can the

<sup>36</sup> Given that the price of 1 kilogram of mutton is currently about Rs 200, this price seems to be rather cheap.

<sup>37</sup> *República*, 8 December 2014, p. 7.

government assure her citizens that people with such cruel hearts cannot turn their weapons on their countrymen?" (*República* 2014). Lucia de Vries (2014), Volunteer Director at Animal Nepal, gives the appropriate answer: "The campaign against the mass sacrifice at Gadhimai cannot be imported, it has to grow from within." Reading the proofs on July 24th, 2016, I can report that Gadhimai's Temple Trust has apparently announced the cancellation of all future animal sacrifice at the Gadhimai festival, at least if a report in the *Times of India* is to be believed. This is the statement made by the temple trust chairman, Ram Chandra Shah: "For generations, pilgrims have sacrificed animals to the Goddess Gadhimai, in the hope of a better life. For every life taken, our heart is heavy. The time has come to transform an old tradition. The time has come to replace killing and violence with peaceful worship and celebration. Our concern has been this: how do we convince the people, so desperate for the favour of Gadhimai, that there is another way? How do we bring them on our journey? Thankfully, the dedicated efforts of the Animal Welfare Network Nepal and Humane Society International/India has shown us the path and provided the motivation to make this transformation a reality" (*Times of India*, 28 July 2015, [timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/Animal-sacrifice-banned-during-Nepal-festival/articleshow/48250253.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/Animal-sacrifice-banned-during-Nepal-festival/articleshow/48250253.cms), accessed 24 July 2016).

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*Religion, Secularism,  
and Ethnicity in  
Contemporary  
Nepal*

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